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## The Istanbul Process: prospects for regional connectivity in the heart of Asia

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**Abstract** In 2014, Afghanistan will confront profoundly significant challenges: international troops will withdraw and a pivotal presidential election is scheduled in April. In anticipation, the USA has outlined the ‘New Silk Road’ vision, as part of an attempt to move away from military solutions towards a notion of regional connectivity in South Central Asia. This vision has been the target of extensive criticisms, especially in terms of a perceived gap between rhetoric and reality, yet it is striking that a major segment of the region has begun to take ownership and move in new directions. A key manifestation of this shift is ‘The Istanbul Process on Regional Security for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan’ (IP) launched in 2011. This article evaluates what has been achieved thus far and the obstacles which may undermine a full realisation of the process. The IP’s focus is on ‘connectivity’, engaging the landlocked nation of Afghanistan and safeguarding it from the isolation which fomented extremism and conflict in the past. Expanded connections must also take account of divisions between participating nations, the potency of the insurgency, the weaknesses of the Afghan state and issues without direct linkage with Afghanistan such as the ongoing conflict in Syria. If the process enjoys even a modicum of success, further regional crises might be averted, and new opportunities for sustainable development will be uncovered.

### Introduction

In 2014, Afghanistan will confront profound challenges: as international troops withdraw, and a pivotal presidential election to replace Hamid Karzai is scheduled in April. In anticipation, the USA has outlined the ‘New Silk Road’ (NSR) vision, as part of an effort to move away from military solutions towards a notion of regional connectivity in South Central Asia.

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This vision has been the target of extensive criticisms, especially in terms of the perceived gap between rhetoric and reality, yet a major segment of the region has begun to take ownership and move in new directions.

A key manifestation of this shift is ‘The Istanbul Process on Regional Security for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan’ (IP) launched in 2011. The IP’s focus is on ‘connectivity’, engaging the landlocked nation of Afghanistan and safeguarding it against the isolation which fomented extremism and conflict in the past. This article evaluates what has been achieved thus far and the obstacles which may undermine full realisation.

The ancient Silk Road symbolised trade and cultural exchange and encompassed a range of land and sea trade corridors which traversed Eurasia. The intersections created between people of diverse cultures led to an unparalleled sharing of commodities, ideas, arts, science and innovation. The vision of the NSR aims to reinvigorate this connectivity and cooperation, with ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ intervention strengthening linkages in what is now referred to as the ‘South Central Asia region’.

Its core components are physical connectivity through transport, communication and energy projects and harmonisation/simplification of practices, regulations, legislation and agreements in the areas of trade and transit which facilitate the flow of goods and services (Tracy 2013). The overall goal is to create an economically vibrant, interconnected region in which Afghanistan is a ‘full partner’.

How does the IP fit into the NSR, and in what ways is it distinct? The process reconceptualises Afghanistan as the ‘Heart of Asia’ (HA), the linchpin of a broad, eponymous region which draws upon the legacy of the Silk Road. Responsibility is transferred *away* from the USA towards key actors in the process, although a range of Western contributions are nonetheless invited. Participating nations therefore decide for themselves how best to cooperate. This gravitational shift provides Afghanistan with a greater role than in other regional initiatives, for example the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where its position (as well as that of Iran and Pakistan) is relegated to ‘Observer Status’.

For Afghanistan, this shift in emphasis has helped to nurture budding diplomacy and opportunities for dialogue with its neighbours. However, ‘ownership’ does require qualification. Given US interests (financial and strategic) in the putative HA and rivalries with great powers such as Russia and China, participating countries are constrained in their capacities to fully shape the direction and outcomes of the IP. The extensive remit of the process actually weakens the chances of success across all areas.

The underlying strategy is to transform Afghanistan from what former British Af/Pak Representative, Ambassador Sherard Cowper-Coles, described as a ‘besieged garrison’<sup>1</sup> into a kind of ‘Asian roundabout’ (Hormats 2011). Its expanded depiction as the ‘HA’<sup>2</sup> places Afghanistan at the crossroads of a revived Silk Road, featuring vibrant economic cooperation and new transit connections reinforced by local and private ownership.

In this way, Washington, through Clintonesque ‘soft power’ (Nye 2004), is able to re-assert its influence even as it withdraws its instruments of hard power. A significant

<sup>1</sup> Weidenfeld Lecture, Oxford, 9 May 2013

<sup>2</sup> The terms, ‘Heart of Asia’, the ‘Istanbul Process’, and the ‘New Silk Road vision’, are all used here to describe the process which began in Istanbul in 2011.

problem for implementation, however, is that the role of the USA as a ‘supporting country’ is not accepted by key actors. Ambiguities surrounding its actual position and objectives in the HA region and what financial contributions it will make have undermined the process. Uncertainty over whether the IP’s central focus is that of cooperation in order to facilitate a new security paradigm, or merely development, has critical implications for its success.

Future stability in Afghanistan requires careful balancing between its relations with its neighbours and its continued dependence on long-term USA and Western support. It also entails that regional and global powers agree common interests in the future stability of the country.

The IP is launched in a crowded arena replete with other regional initiatives, including the SCO, the Central Asia Regional Economic programme (CAREC) and the Eurasian Union (EU). It is designed not to supplant these efforts, but ‘complement’ them and bring ‘coherence’ (Burns 2009), capitalising on the emerging consensus which supports regional peace and economic development.

Its central narrative is that of peace, not securitization. Whereas the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has the capacity to address threats confronting the region through military power, this strategy is not available to the IP. Instead, it relies upon dialogue to achieve its objectives.

The centrality of the IP’s quest for peace contrasts with the core concerns of the SCO. The recent Bishkek Declaration, signed at the 2013 SCO summit, clearly reflects Russia’s current foreign policy priorities. Syria proved to be the key issue at what was meant to be a meeting focusing on Afghanistan, yet Kabul received little attention, other than a note that Afghan reconciliation was a matter for its people, and the government they elect in April 2014.

The new trajectory offered by the IP frames the threats of terrorism, trans-national criminal narcotics and weapons networks, environmental degradation and humanitarian crises, as opportunities for cooperation and consultation. It acknowledges the need for wide regional support to address these issues. A broad spectrum of public and private actors are mobilised to support the process, creating new spaces for public and private collaboration. A significant difference from existing regional strategies lies in an avowed focus on non-state actors, expanding the scope of engagement beyond governments to the business sector and civil societies and fostering integration. Its thrust is intended to be ‘bottom up’, not ‘top down’.

Planned cooperation further incorporates social, cultural, scientific and educational alliances. The web of actors linked through the IP brings together 14 countries, 17 observer nations and 11 international organisations. The rationale is that the future of Afghanistan and its surrounding neighbourhoods are inescapably intertwined.

Below, the ‘*Theoretical framework*’ draws principally on Regional Conflict Formation theory (RCFT). This is connected with the ideas of Simbal Khan (New America Foundation 2013), who emphasises the positive changes that have occurred in the HA as a consequence of intensive interaction generated by US interventions since 2001. Within this perspective, the IP may gradually build on the seeds sown through ‘hyper-intervention’, creating a broader regional vision.

‘*The Istanbul Process*’ outlines the background to the IP and its objectives. The most recent HA conference reaffirmed the ‘convergence of regional interests’; shared

interests are ‘best served by cooperation’ (Embassy of Afghanistan 2013). ‘Shared threats and geopolitical perspectives on peace’ considers how threats are often conceptualised in different ways, examining in detail the often wildly divergent approaches to peace of Afghanistan’s neighbours and key players in the process. The next section is the ‘Evolution of the IP’, while ‘Problems in the process’ evaluates the many problems in the initiative, and the final section makes recommendations for how these difficulties can be resolved.<sup>3</sup>

## Theoretical framework

RCFT (Rubin and Armstrong 1998, 2002; Armstrong and Rubin 2003; Herzig 2000) portrays Afghanistan as the ‘heart’ of a larger regional dynamic and claims that several ‘networks’ have tied Afghanistan within a broader arc of ‘regional conflict formation’. Armed networks are covertly supported by neighbouring states, connecting the conflict to violence in other unstable areas, such as Kashmir and Chechnya. Thus, it follows that cooperative strategies represent the optimal route with which to deal with the trans-national threats confronting Afghanistan and its neighbours.

This strategy situates responsibility for security principally within the HA region, albeit with underlying ‘international support’. It complements Collier’s (2007) argument that poor, landlocked nations such as Afghanistan, with ‘bad’ neighbours and experiencing prolonged civil wars, need cooperation in order to address extremism and poverty. For RCFT, cooperation entails making use of shared resources and dismantling barriers to trade. The IP’s architects recognise that the path to connectivity will be an arduous, multigenerational effort.

Commentators such as Khan (NAF 2013) refer to the antiquated nature or ‘older security binds’ of the opposing ‘Regional Security Complex Theory’ (RSCT) developed by Buzan and Waever (2003). Khan believes that this emphasises rivalries and obscures the positive dimensions of interaction between Afghanistan and its regional neighbours. Washington’s intensive focus on Afghanistan since its intervention in 2001 has had consequences for neighbouring countries, which have benefited from this hyper-engagement. Khan argues that they are now ‘daring to imagine a future based on a cooperative-competitive model’ (NAF 2013) rather than the legacy of the Great Game.

While proxy warfare continues through support for insurgent factions of local warlords, it is paralleled by more constructive links with influential powerbrokers in Kabul. Khan believes that use of hyphenated labels—for example, ‘South’ versus ‘Central Asia’—disguise the wider web of interaction existing in the HA. This new paradigm is reflected in ‘interaction on the ground’ through ‘people-to-people connections’ and infrastructure projects, such as the *Hairatan-Mazar-e-Sharif* or Tajikistan’s supply of electricity to Afghanistan (NAF 2013).

Khan argues that these kinds of connections should not be viewed in isolation from the political and security issues facing Afghanistan. Rather, they have ‘already segued into the political dynamics’ (NAF 2013). An examination of the IP’s unfolding suggests

<sup>3</sup> The research draws on primary and secondary data. The former includes interviews and discussions with politicians and analysts connected with the IP, principally in Afghanistan. This creates some bias in conceptualising the wider region. Existing media and academic commentaries are used extensively.

that her outlook may be too optimistic, especially in light of Afghanistan's imminent transition and the continuing challenges posed by the insurgency, yet it does highlight the possibilities provided by an extended time horizon.

The IP's core objective is peace in Afghanistan. This paper looks more deeply at the question of 'peace'—largely under-explored in the literature—and how it might contribute to or weaken support for the process. Such an approach will supplement the weaknesses of RCFT by examining why HA participants, despite often agreeing on the need for peace, may not collaborate on strategies to achieve it.

Peace models function in similar ways to those of securitization. What might be termed 'pacification' can be defined as a process of framing an issue as connected to peace' in order to validate the adoption of certain measures. This succeeds when the target audience accepts this framing yet, paradoxically, may not yield peaceful outcomes.

In cases of securitization, Balzacq (2011, p. 14–15) highlights two main contexts. The proximate context, concerning the micro-environment and immediate interactions (in this case, Afghanistan) and the distal context, concerning the macro-environment: the broader social setting in which the process occurs (the HA). This also applies to the process of pacification.

In the latter case, the international context, involving norms and ideas about what peace entails, interacts with the domestic one: past practices, identities, culture and collective memories of the target audience (Adler and Barnett 1998). Hansen (2000, p. 289) contends that securitization entails "a sufficient acceptance of the threat in question from the relevant audience". This is equally pertinent to pacification where success is determined by the creation of an *intersubjective* understanding between policy enunciators and target audiences. This is the Achilles heel of the IP.

Although the focus of the IP is on peace, Clausewitz' reflections are pertinent here: "The ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated... often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date" (Leroux-Martin 2014). The experience of other attempts to achieve peace agreements is that warring factions often continue pursuing belligerent goals even after formal cessation of conflict.

## The Istanbul process

In recent years, the implicit and explicit understanding between regional and Western states, critical to the success of the immediate post-Taliban period, has fractured. Relations between Afghanistan's neighbours and the West are constrained by geo-strategic rivalries and divergent interests, including international tensions over Iran's nuclear programme and potential geopolitical changes resulting from ongoing upheavals in the Middle East.

In 2009, the Obama administration appointed Richard Holbrooke as Special Af/Pak Representative as part of a new regional strategy for Afghanistan, while Britain appointed Sherard Cowper-Coles as its Representative. He argues that, "Afghanistan cannot be stabilised without engaging its neighbours, Pakistan above all, but also India, China and Russia, seriously and collectively" and that the "serial bilateralism which has characterised American diplomacy on Afghanistan" is ineffective. Instead, "we need

regional stakeholders to believe that we actually want to work with them collectively in stabilising Afghanistan”.<sup>4</sup>

As Cowper-Coles observed, other countries, such as Iran, Russia, China, and the Central Asian Republics (CARs), share an interest in the stabilisation of Afghanistan and the surrounding neighbourhood. Now, the idea of a regional approach has been reignited.

The IP was initiated in November 2011 in Turkey and followed up in Kabul at ‘The HA Regional Meeting’. The most recent general conference was held in Kazakhstan in April 2013; there are plans for a fourth conference in Beijing this year. The process is much broader than that envisaged by the 2002 Kabul Declaration. Created by 15 direct or regional neighbours, it includes Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the UAE, and Uzbekistan. ‘Supporting nations’ include the USA, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Egypt and Iraq.

The IP incorporates an inclusive notion of security, principally through regional mechanisms. It calls for synergies with existing mechanisms and observes the need for a more coherent, structured approach to individual initiatives. The process entails cooperation with which to enhance an inclusive form of security at multiple levels: political and security fields; economic, educational and cultural fields; science and technology; and law enforcement.

It also takes note of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral initiatives between Afghanistan and states with the capacity to contribute to regional cooperation. It welcomes various efforts aimed at intensifying cooperation and dialogue between Afghanistan and its neighbours, recognising the intertwined nature of various challenges faced by all countries in the region. It works to ‘enhance rather than supplant existing mechanisms for regional cooperation’. An ideal regional approach must explore common opportunities rather than dwell on differences.

### **Shared threats and geopolitical perspectives on peace**

The IP has provided a degree of consensus around the nature of shared threats to the HA. However, interpretation of the meanings of these threats is filtered through the lens of national interests. Consequently, responses differ; multilateral cooperation is difficult to achieve. Situating peace in Afghanistan as the pivot for cooperation further complicates the process, as positions on how peace should be secured diverge.

The quest for peace cannot be understood in a vacuum; it intertwines with a number of disputes at local, national and regional levels. One effort to map this examines regional disputes between India and Pakistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan and Taliban factions which span their borders, Iran and Saudi Arabia and the USA and Iran (Vigier 2009).

The Afghan conflict is therefore multilayered, with intricate roots in the past. It is shaped by tribal, ethnic, regional and economic factors that often encompass local, national, regional and international levels. This section demonstrates the ways in which

<sup>4</sup> Discussion with Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles after the Weidenfeld Lecture, Oxford, 9 May, 2013.

regional intervention through the IP is often hindered by the continuation of negative strategies and divergent conceptions of how peace should be addressed.

Central to this is the uncertain presence of the USA in the post-2014 period. Historically, Afghanistan has played host to various geostrategic conflicts, with the legacy of the Great Game still evident in the use of proxy models by great powers and Afghanistan's neighbours to foment conflict and hedge their bets should the country remain unstable. National rivalries and fragmentation have often clouded the perception of shared economic opportunities reinforced through labyrinthine bureaucracy and lack of infrastructure with which to support economic cooperation.

The IP is conceptualised to bridge this gap, but even its approach does not imply the naïve idea of complete regional harmony. Rather, it concentrates on developing productive patterns for improving peace and stability in the HA as a whole. The success of pacification strategies is largely determined by acceptance of target audiences (HA countries) of the vision articulated by policy enunciators. Even where agreement emerges, peaceful outcomes may not ensue.

### Afghanistan and the USA

Sustainable security in post-2014 Afghanistan is premised on the nature of the continuing US presence in the country, the strength of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and a successful political transition.

The question of good governance is especially critical, as highlighted at the 2012 Tokyo Conference (Tokyo Declaration 2012). Finally, Afghanistan's economic transition away from donor dependency towards self-sufficiency and private sector development will be integral to its stability.

The fundamental outline for post-2014 USA-Afghan relations is contained in the 'Bilateral Security Agreement' (BSA), enabling American forces to remain in Afghanistan. This falls under the 'Strategic Partnership Agreement', specifying a general framework for the relationship over the next 10 years, yet there is lingering uncertainty whether either party will be able or willing to adhere to the provisions of the pact.

For Kabul's part, its expectations include fair elections, anti-corruption measures and improved protection of human rights. Points of contention, though, revolve around the nature of the future security relationship. The Karzai administration wants to be considered as though it was a NATO ally, yet it refuses to allow American forces to continue hunting for Al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan. Instead, it wants any intelligence to be handed over to the ANSF, which could then decide on appropriate action.

However, the continuation of the American drone programme in tribal border areas—exemplified by the recent killing of Taliban leader, Hakimullah Meshud—demonstrates the reluctance of Washington to cede control. There are also concerns over immunity for US military personnel and the number of troops that will remain. The nature of US 'presence' is still undecided; there will be no 'permanent' American bases for use against neighbouring countries, but the agreement may permit long-term use of Afghan facilities. The level of American economic aid remains unspecified.

Washington's real position in the HA region remains uncertain for all states involved in the IP. What will super-bases mean for the security of Afghanistan's near and extended neighbours? How will the USA continue to utilise its influence over Pakistan



in order to pursue its own interests? How much funding will it contribute to the IP, and how will it use commercial interests to extend its power in the HA region?

### Pakistan

Of Afghanistan's regional neighbours, Pakistan is viewed as most critical to peace. Islamabad frames its interaction with Kabul through the prism of the existential threat which India poses to Pakistan's survival. Historically, it has wanted a weak Kabul government dominated by a malleable, supportive Taliban insurgency, enabling 'strategic depth' against India (Tellis and Muharji 2010, p. 17–26).

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) maintains a close relationship, founded on mutual benefit, with factions of the Taliban, such as the Haqqani Network (Waldman 2010). The latter needs external sanctuary, military and logistical support; the ISI assists it to enhance Pakistan's position viz. India.

The ongoing Afghan war straddles the disputed border with Pakistan; the Durand Line was never officially recognised by Kabul, and the shared Pashtun population represents a persistent source of tension. Without the acquiescence of the ISI, a peace settlement in Afghanistan is unlikely.

It is possible that incorporating Pakistani input within a broader regional process such as the IP could ultimately be constructive. Islamabad's support is essential to a lasting peace settlement; its hostility is not a static variable, yet genuine cooperation cannot be expected before the fundamental causes of its insecurity are addressed. This requires a regional peace process and support for a resolution of the Kashmir dispute from 'extended neighbours', particularly the USA (Harpivken 2010). It further necessitates military and political reform, and a combination of incentives and disincentives to persuade Pakistan's elite that support for the Taliban is no longer in its national interests.

### Iran

Iran has substantial security concerns relating to American presence in Afghanistan after 2014, viewing this as an 'existential threat'. However, it is actually ambivalent on withdrawal, publicly demanding it while also fearing this could indicate a return to power of the inherently anti-Shi'a Taliban, which it fought to expel before the American invasion.

Tehran wants a pro-Iranian government in Kabul, which would distance itself from the USA, but not be dominated by the Taliban or its proxies (Dobbins and Shinn 2011). It wants gradual withdrawal of international troops in order to minimise threats to its investments, especially along its borders in western Afghanistan.

It perceives the introduction of the NSR vision as a threat to its economic influence as an emerging transportation route to Central Asia and Europe. Iran aims to be a key partner in regional integration in the HA. Certain signature projects of the IP that circumvent its territory, such as the Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, are viewed as contrary to its interests.

However, the recent election of Hasan Rouhani may reduce hostility between Iran and the West and perhaps nudge the ruling hierarchy towards more flexible approaches and deeper engagement in the IP's quest for peace (Mousavian 2013). For Tehran, the



possibilities for cooperation with Afghanistan in the post-2014 period may outweigh the advantages of continuing low-level proxy warfare through factions such as the Taliban. In particular, an improved American-Iranian relationship would render a regional peace solution much more realisable for the IP.

### Central Asian republics

Afghanistan constitutes both a problem and an opportunity for the five CARs. Its continued instability renders it a detrimental source of extremism, terrorism, narcotics and weapons trafficking, yet the economic reconstruction promised by the IP can also lead to opportunities for greater cooperation on gas, electricity, transportation infrastructure, pipelines, hydroelectric power, equipment and technology transfer, expertise in agriculture, education and science (Weitz 2006).

The post-2014 period implies geostrategic fine-tuning for all CARs. Western hyper-engagement since 2001 has enabled them to utilise the Afghan issue as an important policy mechanism in relations with great powers and neighbouring countries.

In such vein, Kazakhstan portrays itself as a responsible stakeholder in the international community. It has taken the lead in education, humanitarian aid and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan through the IP; the last and most substantive HA meeting took place in Astana in 2013.

The principal issue underpinning Kyrgyzstan's geostrategic position, however, is the status of the Manas military base. If the USA is permitted to use the base with civilian status, it will remain a potent source of revenue, but accommodation of American interests risk incurring both the antagonism of the Kyrgyz public and Russian resentment (Dzhuraev 2013).

Turkmenistan is committed to the doctrine of 'perpetual neutrality', consistent with its position in the 1990s. It will cooperate with whatever government succeeds the Karzai administration, regardless of whether it is strongly influenced by the Taliban. Its intention is to harness the potential for economic growth provided by the IP, while safeguarding against the overflow of threats originating in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are in more vulnerable positions should the Taliban regain power. This would force Tashkent to choose either confrontation or conciliation; the reinforcement of the domestic Uzbek Islamist opposition would be a central concern. Like Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan wants to capitalise on the economic advantages of the HA, particularly its electricity exports and railway investments, irrespective of the ideological orientation of a new government in Kabul. Tashkent also wishes to exploit the strategic advantages gained from US intervention and its involvement in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). This affords it a vital position in the HA.

For Tajikistan, the permeability of Tajik/Afghan societies renders Afghanistan as an important determinant of its future stability (Olimov and Olimova 2013). Should the Taliban regain power, Afghan Tajiks would be at risk, creating substantial difficulties for Dushanbe in terms of cooperation with Kabul. Renewed civil war would mean that Tajik territory could be used to support Afghan Tajiks in the conflict. There is also the fear that geopolitical and economic competition would intensify between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; the Afghan issue is employed as a foreign policy mechanism by both nations. Instability in Afghanistan could further lead to Tajikistan, finding itself caught in a proxy war between Moscow and Washington.

In terms of the peace process and economic development, CA states therefore maintain a range of unilateral proposals. Ashgabat would like to use Turkmenistan's position as a neutral power to broker peace negotiations. This would strengthen its position on the international stage as a neutral state. It wants to engage in economic cooperation, particularly through the TAPI pipeline. Tashkent also wants to play a role in regional diplomacy, but not as part of a cooperative process that includes Russia (such as the IP); instead, it proposes a unilateral solution, the '6+3' initiative, with the support of the UN (Tadjbakhsh 2012, p. i–x).

On balance, asymmetric rivalries between CA states, reinforced by the intervention of external actors in the region, help explain their failure to engage in a collective regional strategy towards Afghanistan. These states are intensely focused on regional security dynamics and seek to maintain equilibrium between both internal rivals and the influence of external actors. The absence of a collective strategy towards Afghanistan reflects the failure to attain intra-regional cooperation and a shared security strategy among the CARs. This pattern is likely to obtain in the future, again undermining the momentum of the IP.

### Russia and China

Considerably, as a result of its own traumatic recent history in Afghanistan, Russia recognises that the potential failure of the USA and NATO to secure Afghan stability may increase the power of the insurgency, with significant consequences for the stability of the region. It is very unlikely to contribute to military operations to stabilise Afghanistan in the post-2014 period, but is interested in expanding its sphere of influence through infrastructure projects, provision of material for the ANSF and increasing cooperation with forces on the ground in countering narcotics operations.

Russia negotiated with NATO to allow the NDN, a series of commercially based logistical arrangements connecting Baltic and Caspian ports with Afghanistan via Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Ironically, this makes NATO dependent on Russian goodwill. Russia also wants greater engagement with the regional military organisation it sponsors, the CSTO.

Moscow is reluctant to give full support to the IP, which is largely connected to its own interests in influencing the HA countries. Nonetheless, it has reinforced the TAPI project, a core IP initiative, announcing this at the SCO Summit in 2011. It has also promoted the concept of a single economic space within the Customs Union created in 2010 between itself, Belarus and Kazakhstan. It believes that this will ultimately transform into a Eurasian Union, with other nations within the post-Soviet sphere joining too.

From a regional perspective, China is much more likely to favour the SCO—where it exercises greater levels of control—than the IP. Beijing is less engaged in military and security issues connected with Afghanistan than Moscow. The SCO does provide a space for debates concerning Afghanistan and broader regional security, but it enjoys negligible influence on the ground. It lacks a coordinated structure between member states focused on Afghanistan to deal with humanitarian crises, refugee issues or shared border management (Cooley 2012).

In strategic terms, Beijing conceptualises the CARs as a critical buffer through which to stabilise and develop the Xinjiang region. Its fear of the deepening links

between Uighur separatists and Islamic extremists has led it to increase border and intelligence cooperation, engage in confidence-building measures (CBMs) with state governments and strengthen its relations within the SCO. The underlying rationale is that economic development in Xinjiang—rendering it the centre of China's oil and gas industries—will counter extremism and lead to stabilisation.

## Evolution of the IP

During the most recent stage of the IP, HA countries have moved from purely technical preparatory work towards concrete action. CBMs intended to foster the process are now ready to be implemented. These include disaster management (led by Kazakhstan and Pakistan), counter-terrorism (Afghanistan, Turkey and UAE), counter-narcotics (Azerbaijan and Russia), chambers of commerce (India), commercial opportunities (India), regional infrastructure (Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan) and education (Iran). Willingness to take the lead in CBMs is indicative of the importance which participating nations attach to the IP and their interest in shaping the process as powerbrokers.

Nonetheless, CBMs appear more like fields of cooperation than concrete measures aimed at facilitating and sustaining political, economic and other forms of regional cooperation. In terms of individual CBMs, there have been some practical, but predominantly *bilateral*, results connected to the broader regional process. In this way, the IP seems to repeat tendencies that predated its initiation in the HA.

Delhi regard a focus on private investment as an important tool for addressing the post-2014 vacuum. As Khan (NAF 2013) notes, trade cannot be viewed in isolation from questions of security, peace and stability. The Indian-led CBM on trade, commerce and investment opportunities, for example, is making substantive progress. Tariffs have been lifted on most Afghan exports to India, which is working to develop connections from Afghanistan's Bamiyan Province through the Iranian port of Chabahar, thereby accessing Afghanistan's largest known iron ore mine in Hajigak (where an Indian consortium has already secured the extraction contract) bypassing Pakistan.

In addition, Afghanistan has signed multiple bi-, tri- and quadrilateral trade and transit agreements with its regional neighbours, including the Afghanistan-Pakistan, Afghanistan-Tajikistan and Afghanistan-Kazakhstan-Pakistan-Tajikistan transit trade agreements and the CAREC Afghanistan-Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan customs and trade agreements.

Although the IP's push to make Afghanistan a regional hub has yielded concrete results in Central Asia, with access via rail to Uzbekistan, Europe and China, these developments could prove counter-productive should they disturb the regional trade balance at the expense of Pakistan.

Some bilateral progress has also been made with regard to Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan—the former plans to open an embassy in Kabul. It is helping Afghanistan improve its customs regulations and gathering, in cooperation with Russia, counter-narcotics CBM stakeholders. Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, meanwhile, initiated a project to begin building a trilateral railway in early July 2013. Technical discussions are ongoing, but important questions over feasibility (due to lack of clarity about funding and growing insecurity in northern Afghanistan) remain unaddressed. It

is also unclear whether this tripartite initiative falls within the remit of the HA process. What is clear is that this railway, if built, bypasses Uzbekistan, where Tajikistan is already involved in conflicts over trade, transportation and water sharing.

Kazakhstan supported Afghan involvement in regional structures, such as the CAREC, OSCE and SCO, the latter in which Afghanistan obtained its Observer Status in June 2012. It has provided economic assistance, including the reconstruction of Taloqan-Kunduz-Shir Khan Bandar road; construction of a high school in Dar-e Suf, Samangan and a hospital in Bamiyan; and agrarian assistance and food aid. It has financed scholarships and strengthened its trade relations, mainly through its bilateral trade commission with Afghanistan.

Astana intends to further expand its relationship with Afghanistan, not only diplomatically and economically but also in terms of security by modernising military equipment and potentially training Afghan security forces. Nonetheless, any sporadic practical results of the initiative—which largely remain in the bilateral sphere—pale in contrast to the huge challenges facing Afghanistan and the wider region.

### Problems in the process

The IP was originally designed as a new security paradigm for the HA region. Kabul sought a binding non-interference agreement, including a mechanism through which it could verify commitments. The USA and EU wanted to use the OSCE model in order to suggest a new CBM. For its part, Afghanistan sought binding guarantees regarding mutual non-interference under the auspices of the UN, which would begin the process of closing safe havens beyond its borders and also pointed to the OSCE.

However, Russia, Pakistan and Iran have rejected anything that vaguely resembles a ‘mechanism’, correctly arguing that there are already South and Central Asian mechanisms which barely function. Examples include the Central Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (ECO) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SARRC). Their argument is rather disingenuous: Pakistan has played a duplicitous role in supporting the US intervention in Afghanistan, while providing sanctuary, logistical support and financing for the Taliban and other insurgent factions while Russia remains to be convinced by the Orientalist rhetoric employed by the USA in its portrayal of a revived Silk Road and perhaps correctly views the SCO as a better medium to preserve and enhance its influence in the region.

The NSR vision is, at least in theory, intended to support the IP, yet critics view it more as a conceptual framework than concrete plan (Pyatt 2012). The US State Department has not allocated a specific budget to it nor committed diplomatic staff. Similarly, the NDN was meant to correlate with an increase in American investment in Central Asian economies, but this has not occurred (Lee 2012). It has also failed to enable regional economic cooperation; the only transit is financed by international actors.

At the first IP general conference, Pakistan, Iran, Russia and some CARs rejected the establishment of any security apparatus or new regional organisations, which from their perspective would replicate the remit of many existing organisations. Instead, they wanted broad principles for cooperation, supporting an alternative draft statement of

principles tabled by Russia and suggesting a document which outlined principles to promote Afghanistan's stability in line with the UN Charter.

Fundamentally, they wanted to revive the 2002 Kabul Declaration, which outlined principles including non-interference in each other's internal affairs and respect for Afghanistan's territorial integrity. The problem with that, however, was that it featured no in-built mechanisms of verification; what remains amounts to a watered down version similar to the original declaration.

In essence, Western (and Turkish) efforts at forging regional consensus for the future of Afghanistan fell short of realisation. Regional states proved unwilling to collaborate with the terms dictated, preferring to give prominence to the UN after 2014. As these states saw it, the USA had begun negotiations with the Taliban without genuinely consulting HA countries. When this failed, only then did Washington seek to obtain concessions for non-interference from these states. As Lodhi (2011) puts it, this amounted to a 'curious reversal of the order of business necessary to establish peace and security. Progress in the process of reconciliation with the insurgency ought to have preceded declarations of support and cooperation by regional states'.

A key question for the IP is whether and how the contradictory socio-politico-economic goals of Afghanistan's 'near' and 'extended' neighbours can be balanced within the HA. Additional complications are caused by the ongoing civil war in Syria, which has impacted upon rivalries in other Middle Eastern RSC states and Iran's disputed nuclear programme and larger conflict with the West.

Moreover, Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have recently plunged to a new low. Both countries have made accusations against one another for breaching territorial integrity and supporting violence; Afghanistan has announced that, if at all possible, it will enter into talks with the Taliban without the involvement of Pakistan, the country widely regarded as possessing the access key to the Taliban's leadership. Islamabad has made it clear, at least implicitly, that it demands a continued influential stake in Afghanistan's future, while India also does not want to be a mere spectator in what evolves.

Finally, there are broader geopolitical issues to consider. A fundamental question is whether the Western-led international community is *genuinely* withdrawing from Afghanistan or, alternatively, whether it intends to stay in the country over the long-term, perhaps to pursue yet wider strategic interests.

NATO's statement of November 2012—that Security Council approval might not be essential for it to remain after 2014, but could instead be authorised simply via invitation from Kabul—was covered extensively by Chinese media. In 2013, China, Pakistan and Russia held talks on Afghanistan in Beijing, where they demanded a greater role be allotted to the SCO, while the 11th meeting of the Chinese, Indian and Russian foreign ministers, held in Moscow, partly discussed Afghanistan and called on the international community to deal firmly with the risk of the country once again becoming a safe haven for terrorists and extremists. This could indicate that China and Russia are unwilling to take a larger stake in Afghanistan's stabilisation and may ultimately regard greater cooperation with the Western-led international community as mutually beneficial.

It remains to be seen how the IP can go about balancing and mediating between the divergent socio-political objectives of all participating and supporting states and organisations as it unfolds. A good indicator of success will be if the initiative helps prevent escalation of existing violence in Afghanistan, as well as the outbreak of new conflicts

in the region. What can be said of the process thus far has been its capacity to bring together diverse regimes with hitherto low levels of dialogue in order to discuss the overall situation in the region. Whether it is able to take lasting, concrete measures which provide for a stable Afghanistan following the US-led drawdown in 2014 is, however, the real test.

## Conclusion

The HA was originally imagined as a kind of holistic space connected by shared religion and cultures, social and trade networks, common identities and history that transcend national borders. Through this lens, the IP is designed to generate broad agreement that the political and economic futures of Afghanistan and its neighbours coalesce through collective security against trans-national extremism, terrorism, refugees, migration, drug trafficking and above all, foreign military intervention.

So, why has such a grand vision been diluted? Why has the issue of security been relegated to bilateral agreements? How has the focus become so circumscribed? From a regional perspective, the engagement of the USA, Russia and China is essentially inadequate, particularly on the question of post-2014 security. The pervasive optimism which followed the Bonn I Agreement—that Afghanistan would emerge from the isolation of the Taliban period to become the heart of surrounding states—now seems implausible. Many of the nations in the putative HA are weak. Although there is consensus around the need for peace in Afghanistan, collective agreement on how to achieve it seems unrealisable at this stage. Instead, surrounding states continue to resort to tried and tested mechanisms in order to safeguard their interests.

The shift away from direct US involvement towards increased Afghan responsibility and regional collaboration, anticipated by the IP, may actually have negative consequences. Local rivalries, prominent in the early spread of the Taliban, may be exacerbated, rendering reconciliation more difficult. The IP may also allow regional dimensions of conflict involving Pakistan, Iran and India to gain greater significance and legitimacy. The rebalancing of political allegiances which will inevitably flow from the 2014 election and possible agreements with insurgency factions may accentuate tendencies towards ethnic mobilisation and fragmentation.

The move away from American hyper-intervention could, ironically, reinforce the destabilising effects of the transition. Criminal and terrorist networks on either side of the Durand Line may intensify their activities and become increasingly fragmented. Hence, the spoiler problem may become more complex and intractable as Afghanistan confronts an escalation in violence linked to a range of regional, economic and political actors.

As it presently stands, the IP provides neither the institutional guidelines to channel this complexity nor mechanisms to incorporate the changing nature of conflicting actors. In other words, the contours of the quest for peace have not been drawn adequately enough to leverage much-needed regional support.

What can be salvaged from the grand vision? The process seeks to bring together the greater Middle East, Central and South Asia and the Pacific around a common agenda. A vital objective is to create a space in which bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral engagement can be coordinated. Although ‘coordination’ is too strong for a term to



characterise what has been achieved so far, out of the confusing plethora of agreements and dialogues within the HA, misperceptions are gradually being removed. Joint projects and interactions do have the potential to encourage the wider regional connections envisioned.

The CBMs developed by the initiative present opportunities for cooperation between diverse processes and organisations. Counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics are recognised as issues for joint action under the SCO and SAARC. As the IP evolves, it may prove able to reinforce and harmonise such efforts.

The IP is very much a *consultative process* rather than a centralised institutional entity. What this offers is the advantage of iterative discussion and ongoing dialogue. It does not advance a coherent vision but, instead, amounts to a piecemeal attempt to forge mutually beneficial strategies. Suraya Dalil, the Afghan Minister of Public Health, says that the ‘the greatest legacy of the West in Afghanistan is energising civil society’.<sup>5</sup> Just as the Taliban do not represent the majority of Pashtun interests, so a wider spectrum of social forces exists in Afghan society; their exclusion has weakened the possibilities for peace.

Khan (NAF 2013) strikes an optimistic note in her reflections of how wider regional interaction of multiple civil societies has already fed into the quest for peace and stability. An examination of the IP shows inadequate evidence of this; nonetheless, the initiative demands an underpinning of pan-regional civil societies, an important point for emphasis as it unfolds.

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<sup>5</sup> Discussions with the author following the Weidenfeld Lecture, Oxford, 9 May 2013



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